



HIGH-WATER MARK

AWARD-WINNING DIRECTOR EMBRACES TECHNOLOGY THAT REPLACES ANIMALS IN FILM

IN THE UPCOMING FILM *Noah*, animals won't board the ark two by two but byte by byte. That's because director Darren Aronofsky envisioned a better way to bring the Old Testament epic to the big screen.

"I didn't want [to use live animals] creatively anyway," Aronofsky says. "And then I think it's just wrong to bring that into play. ... When you start to get to certain types of creatures, it's really questionable how right it is. Especially now that digital technology is basically

able to get really close, there's really no reason to do it."

Known for innovative, thought-provoking films such as *Black Swan*, *The Wrestler*, and *Requiem for a Dream*, Aronofsky has long felt a deep connection with nature and animals. In high school, he trained abroad as a field biologist with the nonprofit School for Field Studies. He might have pursued a career in conservation science, but a biology class at Harvard turned him down a different path. "I didn't understand what the heck they were talking about, and I ended up moving into the arts."

It was while filming *The Fountain* in 2005 that Aronofsky experienced another career-defining epiphany. "I knew there were monkeys in the script, but I'd never had an animal on a set, so it was a new thing for me," he says. "I was horrified when the monkeys showed up. I couldn't believe the type of treatment they were allowed. Since then, it's just become more and more clear that I didn't want to work with captive mammals ever again."

As more directors like Aronofsky choose digital alternatives in film, TV, and advertising, animal actors could become as obsolete as celluloid film. And that's a good thing, says The HSUS's Debbie Leahy, adding that treatment on the set is just part of the picture. Abusive training methods often occur off-screen during preproduction. Housing and traveling conditions can be abysmal. "A lot of these Hollywood animal trainers have pretty horrible records of Animal Welfare Act violations," Leahy says. "But the film industry doesn't always look into trainers' records before they hire somebody for a project."

In this edited interview with senior editor Julie Falconer, Aronofsky discusses habitat preservation, environmental education, and how technology filled Noah's ark.

How did you become aware of the humane issues surrounding captive exotic animals?

I hadn't been to the circus since I was a really young kid. We went to the circus when [my son] was 4 or 5, and I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I really didn't realize that was

still going on. The cruelty is just unbelievable. I don't think I was aware of it when I was young. Going as an adult, I was pretty nauseated and turned off, and I left the circus.

When did you decide to use digital images instead of real animals in *Noah*?

Outside moral and ethical issues, it's just a very unrealistic thing to do practically as well as not fitting my vision for the film. It's just very hard to work with exotic animals. I did it on *The Fountain*, and I didn't know what was involved. We shot in Montreal, and the monkeys came across the country in cages by road. The conditions of how they traveled and their living conditions were pretty tough. I just remember being very disturbed by it.

How have advances in computer-generated imagery made it possible for filmmakers to avoid using animals?

None of this was possible when we first started making movies. I don't think there was one digital shot in my first two movies. We did some manipulations with early digital work, but it was just starting, so everything's changed. I mean we were making films without cellphones when I began and just starting to cut digitally. Anything's possible now—that's the amazing thing. And I think you move a lot quicker and a lot better in a digital universe.



Director Darren Aronofsky on the set of *Noah*

How did your experiences with The School for Field Studies give you a better appreciation for animals and the natural world?

They take high school and college students and stick them in environmentally sensitive areas to do biological research. When I was 16, I went with them to Kenya. I spent five weeks studying ungulates, which are animals that stand on their hooves. The year after that, I went with them to Alaska and studied thermoregulation in harbor seals.

So I've been involved with environmental issues since I was 16. Most of my charity work today is with The School for Field Studies because that's what did it for me. How they think about balancing environmental issues with people is a big part of their mission statement. It's not just about preserving habitat anymore. We've crossed that bridge where we're invading every environment. There's no more sanctuary. It's about trying to figure out some way to get balance.

After winning a film award for *The Fountain*, you used the money to establish a scholarship for inner-city kids to participate in The School for Field Studies' programs. What inspired you to do that?

I grew up in an urban environment in Brooklyn, and having the chance to experience extreme natural environments changed everything for me. I wanted to help give that opportunity to kids who wanted to escape their concrete jungles.

Which animal protection issues are you most passionate about?

For me, I don't know if it's one concern, one species. It feels like it's a much, much larger issue right now. It's just about trying to bring as much awareness about what's going on as possible. It seems like it's now or never. A lot of things have passed a tipping point according to most people. There are very few things that aren't endangered that are in their original habitat. The time is now to change things.

➤ **NOAH**, a Paramount Pictures release, opens in theaters nationwide on March 28. View the film trailer at noahmovie.com.



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